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ABSTRACT

To spur English teachers to change their attitudes and methods in dealing with nonnative English speaking students, this autobiographical account by a Chicana woman describes how English teachers caused her to feel insecurity, frustration, and embarrassment about her use of language. Among the problems the author describes are her suffering at being forbidden to use Spanish, and at being punished when she did so, in elementary school; her shame at being ridiculed by a junior high school English teacher because she and the other Mexican-American students had never heard of Tom Sawyer; her pain in high school at having her oral reports frequently interrupted with pronunciation corrections; her shame in a college public speaking course at having her "poor" English pronunciation corrected in a cruel and humiliating manner; and her continuing apprehension about public speaking. She also describes current episodes showing that similar problems continue to exist for students. The author argues that English instruction creates a negative attitude toward English and that English teachers are responsible for the high dropout rate among Chicanos and Chicanas, and she concludes by urging English teachers to treat students and their native languages with respect while reinforcing the acquisition of English language skills. (GT)

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"'My Excuse-me Tongue'

or a Chicana in the English Classroom"

Norma E. Cantu

I would like to begin my talk by reading the poem by Lorna Dee Cervanges from which I took my title. It will provide the context for what I have to say.

POEMS FOR THE YOUNG WHITE MAN WHO
ASKED ME HOW I, AN INTELLIGENT, WELL-
READ PERSON COULD BELIEVE IN THE
WAR BETWEEN RACES
--Lorna Dee Cervantes

In my own land there are no distinctions.
The barbed wire politics of oppression
have been torn down long ago.
There are no boundaries. The only reminders
of past battles, lost or won, is the slight
rutting in the fertile fields.

In my land people write poems about love.
They dance on the rooftops, all
of their babies are fat, everyone reads
Russian short stories and weeps;
there are no colors; there is no race;
there are only hands
softly stroking thighs, only words
full of nothing but contented childlike syllables,
and the only hunger is a real hunger,
none of this complicated starving
of the soul from oppression.

I am not a revolutionary.
I don't even like political poems.
Do you think I can believe in a war between races?
I can deny it. I can forget about it
when I'm safe,
living on my own continent of harmony
and home, but I am not
there . . .

I believe in the revolution
because everywhere there is an enemy waiting,
sharp-shooting diplomats round every corner,
there are snipers in the schools...
(I know you don't believe this.
you think this is nothing
but faddish exageration, but
they are not shooting
at you!)
Their bullets are discrete and designed to skill slowly.
They are aimed at my children.
These are facts.
Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my
"excuse me" tongue, and this
nagging preoccupation
with the feeling of not being good enough.

These bullets bury deeper than logic.
Racism is not intelligence.
I can not reason these scars away.

Outside my door
there is a real enemy
who hates me.

I am a poet who yearns to dance on rooftops,
to whisper delicate lines about joy
and the blessings of human understanding.
I try. I go to my land, my tower of words and
shut the door, but the typewriter doesn't fade out
the sound of the blasting,
the screams, the muffled outrage...
My own days bring me slaps on the face.
Every day I am deluged with reminders
that this is not
my land.

I do not believe in a war between races

but in this country
there is war.

I speak to you as a survivor of this war. My scars are many and unfortunately new wounds are inflicted constantly, for the war is not over --sometimes I wonder if it ever will be. I teach English and being a non-native speaker of English has given me a vantage point that allows me a perhaps clearer vision of what happens in the English classroom. By baring my scars to you I hope to do more than make you aware of the tremendous impact we have as English teachers; awareness doesn't always lead to changes, and change is what is needed: change in attitude, change in method, change in the English classroom. In my own role as teacher of English, I have had to implement different changes.

English Instruction in the Elementary School

English instruction in the elementary school in South Texas in the fifties meant "No-Spanish" rules, i.e., rules against using Spanish in school. My grandmother had taught me to read and write in Spanish and the strange syllables that I was confronted with in first grade baffled me. My mother's admonition that I listen and learn English when she left me that first day in the strange place must've helped, for I didn't break into tears as so many others did when the teacher spoke to us. Being the "nice, obedient" daughter that I was, I quickly learned and quickly moved from reading group to reading group until I was in the "With Jack and Janet" group; I believe we were the Blue Bunnies, or some such. I became a champion speller but only after learning to compete. We would usually want to sit down first, and I would often misspell a word so I could join my friends. But the reward came if you didn't sit down; so I learned not to join my friends, but to please the teacher. This could be classified as a form of subtle punishment, but the more blatant forms of attack took the shape of real punishment. Depending on the teacher, we were subjected to a variety of punishments directly related to our use of Spanish. In the third grade, it was 500 lines of "I will not speak Spanish in the classroom (or in the playground)"; in the fifth grade, we were fined for each word spoken in Spanish. In addition to being psychological methods of indoctrination (for weren't we being told that in effect our language was not acceptable?), both of these were terrible hardships on those of us for whom paper was precious. One of my father's rare visits to the school was occasioned by such an assignment. I don't remember the outcome of his visit; I remember only the embarrassment and shame I felt. I don't resent the teachers who inflicted these punishments; no, they are not at fault, they were only doing what they had been taught was the way to teach English. "How will they learn if they persist in using Spanish?" That's how they had been trained to see their teaching situation. They themselves were products of the same system and had been taught through similar methods. Most spoke Spanish, and, with a few exceptions, often spoke Spanish among themselves, though rarely in front of us.

I would like to believe that this has changed, that students whose first language is not English are no longer being punished for their linguistic heritage, are not learning to be ashamed of their language. Why, with all the bilingual-bicultural programs and all, such practices should now be part of history, part of the past, as is the old law which required that all Spanish surnamed students in Texas repeat the first grade. But such is not the case. The elementary school student, even after going through Head Start, is still being taught that his or her language is not good enough. My nephew cauually informed me that Spanish is for the birds, and that he is in the top reading group because he doesn't speak Spanish--of course, he is telling me all this in Spanish. When I pointed this out to him he looked at me with a condescending look and said--"In school, I don't speak Spanish in school." The lesson is still there: Spanish is for the birds.

Junior High

In junior high, the rules were not explicit, but they existed, nonetheless. The English teachers were non-Spanish speakers, and were for the most part not from the area. My seventh grade teacher, for example, was from the East and happened to be in Laredo because her husband was stationed at the air base. Her dissatisfaction and total lack of understanding can best be exemplified by her reaction when she found out that none of the thirty some odd members of her home room class had ever heard of Tom Sawyer. She laughed, scolded us, made comments about our stupidity and in short embarrassed us. I being one of her "top students," felt shame and a vague sense of responsibility for the rest of the class--all of us were Chicanos, by the way. My humiliation had a positive result: I became an avid reader; I was going to show her. I read all of Twain that year and proceeded to read constantly from then on--on the bus, during study hall, during lunch, and sometimes even at home when there was time. That was the effect on me. But what about the others in the class--how many of my peers were turned off, how many other Chicanos and Chicanas were so humiliated and embarrassed by teachers' insensitivity that that they turned away from books, from English? Thoughtless comments, insensitive reactions, unconscious ethnocentrism, perhaps I should call it racism, in the English classroom denied many of us even the opportunity of becoming interested in succeeding, and our failure was predictable.

At this stage in our education, we are tested and counselled about our future career goals. Most tests have been proven to be invalid when the population being tested is made up of non-traditional students; non-native speakers of standard English usually score low in verbal ability. This is especially the case for students whose first language is not English, and whose predictable scores would be lower. The pace is set, and many of us are directed into vocational tracks based on the invalid results of testing in junior high.

High School

In high school, English became one of my favorite subjects. Up to now, I had wanted to be a scientist and math had been my favorite: my junior high counselor had pointed out that if I were seriously considering college I should think about teaching and forget about being a chemist. "It takes six years of college, and college is very expensive," he informed me. As a member of an accelerated English class, I was able to read more than the usual anthologized literature. I read The Diary of Anne Frank and became a devoted diarist (a practice that I adhere to to this day). My scars from this time are of a different kind. They are not so much language based, but are a result of the sexist and racist attitudes of the typical early sixties high school experience. Because I was in the accelerated English class, I was separated from most of my Chicano/a friends: a definite point of conflict. I was an expert at diagramming sentences and had learned well the rules for pleasing my English teachers: I followed instructions, outlined chapters, wrote excellent book reports following what they called SCATI (Setting, Characters, Action, Theme); in short, I was the

model English student. But there were still vestiges of my preoccupation with language that had marred my junior high classes. I detested having to give oral reports. Mrs. Lindheim's "spots" sent me into a panic. We would draw a topic from a box and would then deliver a five minute impromptu talk on the topic--I was terrified, not because I didn't have anything to say, but because invariably my talk was interrupted with pronunciation corrections. I was often admonished to "speak up" and received comments like "Content good, delivery poor," or "Excellent organization, but you must speak louder." When I read Maxine Hog Kingston's Woman Warrior, I empathized fully with the protagonist's distress and persistent preoccupation with precisely this "language problem."

One more scar.... I won't go into the agony over tests and spelling and vocabulary quizzes. I usually did well on them, but there was always a sense of not being able to perform, as if the language would somehow betray me. At this time also, I had practically denied that I had Spanish as my language in spite of the fact that we spoke nothing but Spanish at home. I had learned my lesson well; to succeed, use English.

College Experiences

In college, the English classes were very much like those in high school, and the teachers were much like those in high school as well, except now they were men. My first exam in a College English class (Composition and Rhetoric) I scored the second highest grade. The professor managed to embarrass me in front of the entire class by asking what high school I had graduated from. The highest mark had been made by a student who came from the local catholic academy. The implication was obvious to me; I shouldn't have made a high mark. I never made anything higher than a B after that. Grades are powerful weapons. They are a way of controlling, of inflicting wounds. But I don't want to focus on the methods or the means of the warfare that Lorna Dee mentions; I want to stick to the discussion of the participants, the teachers and the students. The means of control, the attitudes, are of course the teacher's; and here I would like to mention a teacher, not of English but of Speech. In his classroom, my language inhibitions became even greater. Instead of reassuring, of fostering my public speaking, which the class was ostensibly supposed to do, I was so humiliated and felt like such a failure that it took years to get over the trauma. One particular incident stands out in my mind. After listening to one of my speeches and giving me the usual criticism about my volume, he proceeded to dangle a set of keys in front of me. I was supposed to ask for them. At that time, I didn't differentiate between the long and short vowel involved, and what came out was "Give me the kiss." The class burst out laughing and I burst into tears. He had made his point.

There are still sounds that I have to watch for, and I am haunted by fears of mispronouncing words with certain vowels. I avoid the word "sheet" and in fact any other words that have sh or ch sounds. Recently a professor pointed out that I still had a problem with /s/ and /z/. I believe now that the person with the problem is the professor, who thinks

it defective in some way to speak anything but the standard dialect. Unfortunately, my intellectual beliefs do not erase the doubts, fears and apprehension that still creeps in when I speak.

The negative experiences did not end, and the humiliation and the uneasiness with English persists in certain situations. As a student teacher, I was introduced to the tremendous impact that the English Classroom has quite by accident. I was to prepare a bulletin board for my Cooperating Teacher. The B-board was composed of a big blue bottle resembling a Milk of Magnesia bottle, a spoon, and three drops falling onto it from the bottle, labelled grammar, reading, ~~Literature~~ Spelling. The bottle was labelled 7th Grade English. I dutifully made such boards, wrote lesson plans, taped and scored my teaching in spite of my deep objections. The punishment meted out to discipline problems was to copy from the spelling book or from a dictionary. "At least they're learning something," the principal answered to my objections. The texts I was forced to use were racist, and sexist, and the teachers as well as the students were still doing "busy work" that I had resisted but which had "taught me so well."

I am convinced that English teachers are responsible for the high drop out rate among Chicanos/as. The failures I believe are the teachers of English. We persist in teaching not a survival skill which the students need, but the outmoded, unreal language use that we believe is English. Given the educational system our students must go through, we owe them the respect of their language, but also the mastery of the language that they need to function in the system, and indeed succeed with. Instead, we instill insecurity, frustration, embarrassment which will further inhibit and reinforce the inferiority feelings associated with language. In one sense, we are producing exactly what the system seems designed to produce--dropouts.

But things are changing, we are told. No one is fined for speaking Spanish any more, there's bilingual education and LESA programs. Yes, I am aware of the attempts and the rhetoric and I won't totally deride such moves. I suppose there are some students being spared, some students benefitting from the programs. But again, I must refer to personal experiences. There is still a system that is instilling language attitudes: the war is still on. I'll give you another example; I've already spoken about my nephew's view of Spanish. My sister teaches 7th grade math in South Texas. Her students are all bilingual, although occasionally she has a class of monolingual Spanish speakers (recent immigrants). In this particular class, however, all the students speak both languages. She is explaining fractions when the district's math supervisor walks in to observe. One of the students raises her hand: "Yes, Maria." "Pero M'am, como es que...." The supervisor stops the student in mid-question with a vehement outburst against speaking Spanish: "This is a math class, not a Spanish class," he exclaims. The student is in tears and the teacher is furious. A complaint to the principal and to the superintendent brings no results. The class resolves to beware when the supervisor is around, and to limit themselves to English when he comes back. In the same school, with the same population make-up--mostly bilingual Chicano/a students, the eighth grade English teacher must teach a section on myth--Greek

myths, that is, when in her classroom there are students with names like Xochitl. No mention of Nahuatl myths is made.

The examples are numerous, the lesson is clear: A non-native speaker of English is being taught, in effect, as if English were his or her language, and as if there were no other consideration. Recently I have observed that there is a new, perhaps renewed is a better word, war. The war being waged in our schools looks terribly suspicious. Competency testing and stiff college entrance requirements will not improve our educational system, but they will push out more and more young people who will be unemployed and often unemployable in our "sophisticated" technological society. An inmate at the State Penitentiary in Lincoln has observed this trend and concluded that we in the U.S. are in a period of war preparation. I see the role of the English teacher as crucial in whatever happens to our students. Richard Rodriguez claims that it is every student's right to be taught the skills; I agree, but the analysis must be taken further still. The reason many of our students are not acquiring the skills is that English instruction creates a negative attitude toward the language. The English classroom can be either a frightening, oppressive and in effect negative and humiliating experience which results not in learning but in alienating and intimidating the student, or it can be an exciting, positive experience that reinforces language skill acquisition as something desirable but does in no way condemn the learner or impose a value judgment on the skills and the language which that learner already possesses. It can open the proverbial door of opportunity by opening another proverbial door--language.

But I am uncomfortable with this conclusion. It is simplistic, and it reinforces a myth that I am not too willing to pass on; it seems to imply that if the students don't drop out and do finally have a high school diploma in their hands, the whole world is at their feet--not true. I agree with Ivan Illych that our education is not the panacea we have been led to believe. But a complete revamping of our educational system is not the aim of this paper. Within the existing set up, we as English teachers can and are in fact bound to prepare our students, to respect their language skills, and above all to approach our profession with that attitude of respect for our students. When my 8-year old nephew tells me that Spanish is for the birds he is only reiterating what he has learned from his teachers, his peers, his textbooks. Even though no one has "taught" him the lesson, it is well learned. "In this country/there is war."